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# Contextual Theology without Ulterior Motives

Martien E. Brinkman

## THE CONTEXTUAL, REMEMBERED JESUS

It is not simple to write about contextual theology in relation to the theme of this volume: religion without ulterior motives. In current contextual theology the strength of this form of theology is, after all, correctly seen in its embeddedness in and contribution to an existing culture. Of course, this does not imply an uncritical adoption of that culture, but a form of *adaptation* will certainly always be discussed. Otherwise, there is only a hostile confrontation. So, the point of issue is always the role which religion can play in a certain culture. Is that the same as the ‘instrumentalization’ Bram van de Beek is blaming liberation theology for in his article on ‘Religion without ulterior motive’? That will be the main question to be answered in this contribution: *What is the role of the context in contextual theology?*<sup>1</sup>

The question of the extent that the Gospel can be embedded in an existing culture is greatly complicated by the fact that we cannot begin from a cultureless starting point or from a cultureless Gospel. There was never a ‘pure Gospel’. The New Testament itself is an example of contextual theology. It is not conceivable without the cultural attire of the Jewish, Greek and Roman culture of the beginning of our era. So, in a certain sense, the only thing we can do is to compare two kinds of contextual theology.

Everything we know about Jesus, we know from contemporaries who were deeply impressed by him and, hence, reported about his impact upon them. Later on, they wrote down their memories and transmitted them to the next generations. And again later on, the early church gathered these scriptural sources and accepted finally quite a number of them as the New Testament canon after an extended process of selection during more than two

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<sup>1</sup> The first pages of this contribution refer to our ‘Introduction’ in a monography on the ‘Non-Western Jesus’ to be published in the Spring of 2007.

centuries. A final word about the criteria for selection has never been spoken. Until now, the discussion continues within Christianity about the exact number and the faithfulness of the transmitted sources. Therefore, the Jesus we know from the New Testament, is the *remembered Jesus*, remembered by contemporaries and later generations of Christians.<sup>2</sup>

All the names given to Jesus in the New Testament—rabbi, prophet, royal messiah, king of the Jews, Christ, healer, exorcist, son of God, son of Man, high priest, savior, Word, light of the world, Truth, etc.—were well-known religious names in Palestine. All of them have a Jewish or Greek background. The creative application of existing religious names, therefore, already forms the basis of the New Testament imagery about Jesus. With the help of these names, his audience, and later on his readers, could give him ‘his place’ in their lives.<sup>3</sup> Already in Jesus’ lifetime some of these names were contested. The names of Messiah and son of God were especially objects of vehement disputes (Mt.16: 13-20 and John 4: 1-41). Often the names were applied in such a manner that their meaning underwent a considerable transformation.<sup>4</sup>

Many theologians recognize the role of influences from ‘abroad’ in the transmission of the Gospel, but deny the ongoing character of this process of inculturation. In their eyes it was a unique event that was guided by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guided this process of inculturation only once. That process is definitely fixed in the Bible. We do not share that opinion. The inculturation of the Gospel cannot be limited to one period in church history. That would be arbitrary. After the decisions of the early church about the content of the New Testament, the church continued to make important decisions at the councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451). Historically, these councils were as important as the decisions about the content of the New Testament.

Often it is admitted that the first doctrines of the early church were also guided by the Holy Spirit. So, the work of the Holy Spirit in the church did not stop after the

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<sup>2</sup>J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making, Vol. I) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 130-132 and 881-893.

<sup>3</sup>K.H. Ohlig, *Fundamentalchristologie. Im Spannungsfeld von Christentum und Kultur*. (München: Kosel, 1986), 620-621.

decisions about the New Testament canon. It may have been extended to the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon as well. That extension, however, confronts us immediately with the question: Did the Holy Spirit stop its guiding role in church history at any time?

This is a more urgent question when we admit that these councils were definitely not spiritual climaxes in the decision making processes of the early church! Especially at Chalcedon, there was a lot of ‘power play’ from the side of Pope Leo I and Emperor Marcian. *Uterior motives* (!) played an important role.<sup>5</sup>

Many theologians are yet reluctant to extend the work of the Spirit to the whole of church history. They are inclined to make some exceptions for certain periods in church history and grant these periods a special position. Orthodox theologians are especially inclined to treat the main councils of the first seven centuries preferentially. They regard them as the constitutive councils of the ‘undivided’ church. And hence, they earn a special position: unique acts of the early church. Orthodox theologians are fully aware of the great impact of the Greek context upon the early Christian doctrines. They consider that impact, however, not to be a drawback, but rather a benefit.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the opposite approach of most Protestant theologians leads remarkably to the same position. They also do not express a critical attitude over against the role of culture in the early transmission process of the Gospel. They do not sanctify—as the Orthodox do—a certain period of church history, but deny the role of the context, in this case of Greek culture. They stress the impact of the New Testament witness so strongly that they actually play down the role of (Greek) culture. The early Christian doctrines derive their value, according to these Protestant theologians, not from their historically constitutive character, but from their authentically biblical character. So, the New

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<sup>4</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 653-554.

<sup>5</sup>A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche. Von der Apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451)*, Vol. I. (Freiburg: Herder, [1979] 2004 – paperb. ed. of the 3th. pr.of 1990), 753-754 and Vol. II/1, 107-220 and J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. (London: A. & C. Black, [1958] 1980, 5th pr.), 338-343.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. S.S. Harakas, “Must God remain Greek?” *The Ecumenical Review* 43 (1991) 194-199.

Testament defied the Greek context. It was more in spite of than due to Greek culture that the Gospel could pursue its influence.

Both approaches do not ask the question of whether or not the Greek culture, embodied in the early Christian doctrines as well as in the New Testament itself, could have played a constraining role with regard to the proclamation of the Gospel. In contrast to these two approaches we would plea for a more critical attitude. It is necessary also to account for the role of culture in the New Testament. We have to critically analyze the role of culture in the manner that the New Testament authors wrote down their memories of Jesus. And, of course, the same holds true for the church fathers as well. From the very beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel, we have to underscore that the Gospel is a ‘strange’ Gospel. We have to emphasize its ‘over against’ character. ‘Over against’ every culture—the Greek culture as well.

Hence, we have not only to inquire what has been transmitted, but also what has been lost by the cultural constraints of the New Testament and early church era. The then ‘translator’ might have been also a ‘traitor’, like the French proverb ‘traduire est trahir’ taught us. No culture can be the pure bearer of the Gospel. Ulterior motives always play their role. Therefore, each culture can also be a hindrance for the proclamation of the Gospel.

So, the inculturation of the Gospel in the Greek-Hellenistic culture might have been a straitjacket as well—a straitjacket that has hidden some aspects of the Gospel or at least minimalized their importance. A renowned scholar as Alois Grillmeier, author of five extensive volumes on the enduring meaning of the council of Chalcedon, places this point as an open question high on his list of topics to be dealt with in every current evaluation of Chalcedon.<sup>7</sup>

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR DEFINITIONS

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<sup>7</sup>A. Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, Vol. II/1, 11-12.

The above-mentioned issue is also of great importance for the evaluation of the role of the cultural context in topical contextual theologies. Again, the critical question about its impact has to be asked. It concerns the question about *ulterior, external motives*. In every culture the question must be asked anew about what the death and resurrection of Jesus concretely mean for that culture. In this contribution we approach this question from the position that *the continuity and discontinuity that is spoken about in Christian baptism supplies the outstanding pattern from which we can speak about the characteristics of the Christian faith in the midst of a number of various contexts*. In this regard, we fully agree with Bram van de Beek's emphasis on the meaning of baptism as main characteristic of Christian life.<sup>8</sup> In the elaboration of the impact of baptismal renewal in our topical life, the differences between us will be exposed.

Before we further develop our own position, we must first consider a few definitions. We shall consider a three-part definition of religion. By *religion* we understand the *existentially experienced focus on an, our empirical existence transcending, (whether or not personally understood) force field (1) that influences thought and action, (2) and through which communal symbols, rituals and myths receive meaning (3)*. This definition of religion is not exclusively Christian. It offers a framework wherein the world religions can specifically be placed.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Christianity, the personal character of the relation to God will be underscored. From this definition it is clear that religion will always have a cultural form of expression.

This brings us to our definition of culture as well. By *culture*, we understand a *broad system of meaning, norms and values with which people can give sense to their existence in a particular form in a particular time*. A culture is, therefore, always bound

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<sup>8</sup>A. van de Beek, *Hier beneden is het niet. Christelijke toekomstverwachting*. (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005), 53-63.

<sup>9</sup>There is no point in mentioning literature with regard to definitions of religion. There are too many. In the definition mentioned above, we intend to integrate the existential, cognitive, ethical, communal and symbolic aspects of religion. To its core belongs the concentration on an our empirical existence transcending (personal) power.

to a time and place and contains all aspects of the human existence.<sup>10</sup> In fact, we handle this idea of culture as a synonym for understanding context.

When we now place the question of the character of religious motives in relation to the modern notion of contextual theology, it involves the question of how we can judge the transition of the Gospel from one context—for example, the Western context—to another context—for example, a non-Western context. It thus involves the search for criteria for the transition of the one inculturation into the other. That brings us to a third definition. Under a *religious inculturation process* we understand *the transfer of one particular, culturally formed religious concept and value pattern to another culture with its own religious concept and value pattern.*

#### THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

To cut every reproach of quietism off in advance, we begin our exposition of the meaning of Christian baptism with a consideration of the ‘activist’ aspect of baptism. The consideration shall by itself—so we hope to show—lead to a plea for an even stronger honoring of the receptive and receiving aspect of baptism. Like Bram van de Beek, we are inclined to stress the renewal character of baptism. However, more than he does, we plea for a concept of baptism in which the ethical aspects are not considered in competition to the honor dedicated to God alone, the *Gloria dei*, but as integral part of that honor. Ethical aspects are not additional aspects with regard to the love of God, but the most authentic way to express this love.

Our wedding text in 1972 was I John 3: 17 and 18 where John mentions the example of a person who has enough money in order to live; sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him. Then John asks: “How can it be said that the divine love dwells in him?” And then he continues, saying: “My children, love must not be a matter

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<sup>10</sup> Again, there is no use mentioning the many definitions of culture. In our definition, we intend to integrate the existential, cognitive, ethical, communal and symbolic aspects of culture. We use a broad definition in which culture encompasses not only the world of art and science, but also the world of politics and economics.

of words or talk; it must be genuine, and show itself in action.” Time and again Matthew also makes clear what *Soli Dei Gloria* means: “Anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me” (25: 40).

Of course, Van de Beek knows these Bible quotations as well. In his article he repeatedly indicates that faith has ethical consequences, and that it is interested in material and social issues. It sounds, however, like an admission. In his text, these admissions are often immediately followed by admonitions not to make the ethical aspects the core of our faith. Although Van de Beek’s warnings not to ‘instrumentalize’ religion are impressive, convincing and highly needed, we are yet afraid that he runs the risk to suffer the opposite pitfall; namely, of a sterile faith. What would be his main arguments to avoid such a pitfall?

I am sure he too will insist that our faith has to be salt to the world (Matt.5:13). That’s an allusion to an active societal role of the believers. Is it not also true that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, not only is blessing passive aspects of Christian life, but active (showing mercy, making peace) as well (Matthew 5: 1-10)? When Jesus speaks in this section about those who suffer “for my sake,” it is clear that he equates this sake with “the cause of right”(10-11). In order to overcome the artificial contrast between the passive and active aspects of Christian life, we shall plea for a more balanced approach of the theology of baptism in the remainder of this contribution.<sup>11</sup>

Baptism as the God-given possibility for a change of life is pre-eminently “the sacramental bond of unity” among Christians, to quote No.22 of the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II.<sup>12</sup> More than anything else, it is this reliance on the gift of the renewal of life that creates solidarity among the faithful. Through baptism Christians are buried and resurrected in Christ. Thus in Paul’s time, it apparently relativized social

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<sup>11</sup>This theology of baptism is broader developed in chapter 3 (“The Reborn Person”) of our *The Tragedy of Human Freedom. The Failure and Promise of the Christian Concept of Freedom in Western Culture* (Currents of Encounter, Vol.20) (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2003), 61-83.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. N.P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, II: Trent to Vatican II (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 919 (‘Decree on Ecumenism’, 908-920).



differences and therefore, to this day in the history of Christianity, it is still a powerful stimulus for social action that overcomes discrimination.

In this way the term ‘resurrection’, which occurs frequently in the liturgy of baptism, can also literally imply resurrection to new life. That is why the well-known Lima text of the World Council of Churches on baptism, eucharist and ministry states in the chapter on baptism:

By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the “old Adam” is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken. Thus those baptized are no longer slaves to sin, but free. Fully identified with the death of Christ, they are buried with him and are raised here and now to a new life in the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, confident that they will also ultimately be one with him in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6:3-11; Col. 2:13, 3:1; Eph. 2:5-6).<sup>13</sup>

The last clause of this quotation (“confident that they ...”) shows that the Christian idea of renewal of life not only indirectly refers to the first *aporia* concerning the Stoic view of freedom—i.e. the question of how spiritual freedom relates to actual freedom—but also seeks to provide an answer to the second *aporia*, i.e. the question of how the inevitability of death relates to the human experience of freedom. By connecting the death and resurrection of a believer so emphatically with ‘dying and rising with Christ’ through baptism and by linking the experience of freedom with exactly this experience of identification, death and resurrection are experienced in the present, from which his own future death can be placed in another, less threatening perspective. Death may then be spoken about in the past tense even during one’s lifetime: “when we were dead” (Ephesians 2:5). On the basis of this connection one may even defy death: “Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55), and the confident expectation may be uttered that “neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). It is obvious that here Paul, in a certain sense, is “playing with the

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<sup>13</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper No.111) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 2 (B-3).

different literal and metaphorical meanings of the term death. It would, however, be a mistake to spell out all these meanings and to disconnect them, because it is just Paul's intention to show their interconnectedness.<sup>14</sup>

By so emphatically making the ritual of baptism symbolize a decisive turning point in a human life—a real rebirth (John 3: 1-8)—an unprecedented latitude is created for freedom with regard to our collective and individual past, and a perspective of another future is offered. In this way the ritual of baptism shows that only that person to whom this latitude, vis-à-vis his own past and future, is granted is truly free. If our past is fixed, we shall have to carry it like a millstone around our neck as long as we live, and that is the end of our freedom. If our future is fixed, that is also the end of our freedom, and all that is left to us is to follow the course of life that was set by others. In baptism it becomes clear to what extent past and future are connected to each other. Not until our past has been cleansed does our real future open. The process which this opening creates is death, i.e. death to sin. Thus the essence of the whole history of salvation in Christ, and therefore also that of the Christian, lies hidden in a nutshell in baptism.

### *The Impact of Baptism*

The far-reaching social consequences of this approach to baptism have received far too little consideration up to now. Usually baptism is viewed as merely an initiation through which one becomes a member of a church. In the case of adult baptism, it is more clearly a mark in the life of the baptized person, but even then the meaning of baptism is mainly sought in the personal experience of conversion, which is not linked any further to the person's experience of freedom. That is a missed opportunity, because the social consequences of such an experience of baptism—i.e. as an experience of freedom—could be major.

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<sup>14</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. (London: T. & T. Clark, [1998] 2003), 102-127

The churches are primarily themselves to blame for the comparative lack of reflection about the important role which baptism could play in our psychological and social experience of baptism. They have themselves limited baptism to a ‘rite of passage’ without any further necessary consequences, in spite of the fact that the theology of baptism itself encompasses far broader perspectives as is evident from many magnificent baptismal prayers and hymns that often date from the time of the early church. Especially in the so-called established churches, where infant baptism means little more than a sort of registration of birth, there is a drastic reduction of the meaning of baptism. The Christian education about baptism must be more strongly focused on a new way of life—a new lifestyle—not only in the case of adult baptism, but in the case of infant baptism as well. Without this education the church itself is the first which undermines its own message of rebirth.

The separation between a so-called baptism through water and baptism through the Spirit, which took shape early in the tradition of the church and which found expression in two separate rituals, i.e. baptism through water and unction and/or laying on of hands (sometimes called confirmation), has left many less fortunate traces here. It creates the impression that the real change of life comes later and not with baptism, and that the Spirit is not active in the baptismal event. Baptism and renewal of life through the Spirit seem to have become two separate events. As opposed to the rather shallow practice of baptism which resulted from that separation, the Lima text speaks about the “new life” of the baptized as “sign of the Kingdom”; about “a new ethical orientation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” and about “ethical implications which not only call for personal sanctification, but also motivate Christians to strive for the realization of the will of God in all realms of life (Rom. 6:9ff., Gal. 3:27-28; I Peter 2:21-4:6)”.<sup>15</sup>

Let us briefly illustrate with just two examples how (literally) pioneering—not only on an individual level, but also in broader social contexts—it can be if the possibility of change as a result of the liberating effect of baptism is seriously taken into

consideration. Until the present day it is considered usual in international relations to remember old offenses for years, if not for centuries. It is only very rarely that a ‘break’ from the past is affected. And often that can only be done through an explicit gesture such as a ritual that sometimes even looks somewhat like a baptismal ritual.

That was, for example, the case when, during an official state visit to Poland in the context of his ‘East policy’ in the 1970s, the German Chancellor Brandt knelt down at the grave of the unknown soldier in Warsaw (Poland). Through that gesture of mortification—mortification (penance) is traditionally the most important, indispensable mental attitude for baptism—Brandt consciously raised the relationship between Germany and Poland to a different level from that of the usual *do ut des* (‘I give so that you may give’). In so doing, Brandt correctly performed a ‘new’ act in the New Testament sense of the word *kainos*, which means: “not previously present” or “unknown”.<sup>16</sup>

The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the leadership of Bishop Tutu in South Africa can be regarded as a similar, impressive attempt at breaking the pull of the (sinful) past.<sup>17</sup>

Usually, however, the political *métier* is the exact opposite of what is indicated as the essence of baptism in the New Testament: the creation of new relations between reborn, renewed people. The biblical concept of freedom pre-eminently finds expression in the expectation of this newness. After all, without the possibility of something new there can be no form of freedom. Then there is only bondage to what is old and long since fixed. It is especially that fixation on what has historically developed that is broken

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<sup>15</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 2-4 (B-7; B-4 and B-10).

<sup>16</sup> W. Bauer, *Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Berlin: A. Töpelmann, [1958] 1963 5th pr.), 778-779. In the case of infant baptism, it would not be wise to postpone not only the element of renewal, but also the element of mortification. In the liturgy of baptism, in every administration of baptism, all the attendants are called to penance and renewal. So, it is also always a communal experience.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P. Meiring, *Chronicle of the Truth Commission: A Journey Through the Past and Present – Into the Future of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Cape Diem Books, 1999). For a description of the basic assumptions of this truth commission about the way in which the Netherlands deals with its wars and colonial past see R. Dorsman *et al.*, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa and the Netherlands* (SIM Special No. 23) (Utrecht: SIM 1999).

time and again at decisive moments in the Bible. Thus we hear the prophet Isaiah exclaim: “No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you not see it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19). And hence, time and again Jesus is saying: “You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: ... But I say this to you: ...” (Matt. 5:17-48). Without this belief in the possibility of change in the social and cultural order in which people live, the prophetic vision of the Messianic reign and the New Testament proclamation of the kingdom of God are unthinkable.

### *Baptism and the Kingdom of God*

However much debate there may have been about the priority of the present (the ‘already’) or the future (the ‘not yet’) of the New Testament references to the kingdom, in both cases those references exert a strong relativization of any tendency to make an absolute of what exists. For in both cases, the expectation is that either in the present or in the future a great deal is going to change. The kingdom of God is always something different from any social utopia to be realized by us. Whether we understand the coming kingdom as already present, still future or apocalyptic, it is never something that can simply be constructed by us. Although in the 1970s utopia and kingdom sometimes threatened to come dangerously close, in the 1980s the realization of a certain distance began to glimmer through again. In the 1990s there was even a tendency in the reflection on the kingdom of God to push any moment of completion into the background. This, however, appeared to be an overreaction to a previous overemphasis on the historical dimension of the kingdom of God in the theology of the 1970s.

By placing the expectation of this kingdom within the perspective of a theology of baptism, from the very beginning the New Testament removed any reckless aspect from this expectation and thus gave it its much-needed breathing space. Hence, humility is one of the most central characteristics of those who expect the kingdom of God, as

Jesus tells his audience when asked how they could ever inherit this kingdom themselves (Matt. 25:31-46). This humility also has a social dimension. That social dimension has to do with the way in which they mortify themselves not only before God but also before one another. It is only out of this solidarity in humility that baptism can be spoken about in the words of the Lima text as a “sign of the kingdom.”

Baptism initiates the reality of the new life given in the midst of the present world. It gives participation in the community of the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of the Kingdom of God and of the life of the world to come. Through the gifts of faith, hope and love, baptism has a dynamic which embraces the whole of life.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the central place which penance has traditionally occupied in the ritual of baptism, any confusion with all those social utopias which, especially in the twentieth century, have left such a trail of corpses behind them is precluded. Any Promethean tint is alien to good baptismal theology, however much theology, especially in the 1970s when it was in the grip of socialist ideals, sometimes barely managed to resist the appeal of this myth. Rather, in baptism Christianity expresses the awareness that one is not in the world without a sinful past and therefore one is not without sinful ancestry either. We are never a *tabula rasa*.

Although such a sense of realism does not diminish the desire for another, better world, it does remove any naiveté that we might have about it. It makes us realize that that evil does not always only lurk in others, but also in ourselves. Over the past few decades some philosophers such as e.g. Leszek Kolakowski have not tired of pointing out to Christians the humanizing effect of the doctrine of (original) sin, so wrongly maligned by so many Christians.<sup>19</sup> In former times Christians were often blamed for their assumed pessimistic image of humankind. The Calvinists were especially referred to because of question 8 of Sunday 3 of their Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>20</sup> This critique was sometimes so

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<sup>18</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, 3 (B-7).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. L. Kolakowski, ‘ “Is de duivel te redden?”: een marxistische benadering’, *Toekomst van de religie: Religie van de toekomst?* (Utrecht-Brugge: Emmaüs-Desclée de Brouwer, 1972), 100-110. See also, H. Achterhuis, *De erfenis van de utopie* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1998), 107.

<sup>20</sup> For the text of the Heidelberg Catechism, see P. Schaff (ed), *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. III. (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1877] 1966), 307-355, esp. 310 (question 8): “ But are we so far depraved that we are wholly unapt to any good, and prone to all evil?” Answer: “ Yes, unless we

vehement, that unfortunately Christians themselves were even inclined to accept its legitimate character and to drop their emphasis on this doctrine. That turns out to be a big mistake.

Several topical philosophers are convinced of the fact that it is more realistic to entertain a pessimistic than an optimistic image of humankind and that a more optimistic approach only can be justified when a society knows how to deal with sinners. In this regard, it cannot be stressed enough that the radical break with the past implied in baptism is a totally different one from that what was propagated in many, sometimes ‘realized’ utopias. The break with the past in e.g. the French, Russian or Chinese (Cultural) Revolution had nothing to do with the confession of guilt regarding the individual past with which this break traditionally goes hand in hand in the Christian liturgy of baptism. The latter is a repentant acceptance of one’s own life history and the former always a form of settling scores with the sinful past of others. The doctrine of original sin, however, can have a twofold salutary effect. It keeps us both from overconfidence and despair. It prevents us from being utopian about human dreams of a perfect society and from falling into despair over the evident moral failures of individuals and societies.<sup>21</sup>

Besides the radical way in which Christian people profess to have broken with their own past through baptism, they are also thoroughly aware of the fact that baptized people are not saints. The references to the *simul iustus ac peccator* and the phenomenon of penance, understood as a continuous existential return to one’s own baptismal experience of submersion and resurrection, bear witness to this.

This sense of realism does not need to have a fatalistic effect. The history of two thousand years of Christianity shows that its greatest social influence has not been in stimulating forms of social utopias, secularized or not, but in building up the care of the

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are born again by the Spirit of God.” Who would, after Auschwitz and many other examples of genocide in the last century, be prepared to give another answer than the authors of this catechism?

<sup>21</sup> K. Ward, *Religion and Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 185.

sick, the elderly and the poor, the development of agriculture, and the founding of schools and universities. All these activities would not have been possible without the expectation of the 'new' and without the notion of another world. It is obvious that currently all these activities are no longer typical Christian activities. It is a challenge to articulate what currently is the main Christian moral responsibility. One of the main theses of our contribution is that Van de Beek's article is a challenging effort to it, but his approach could be more intrinsically connected with the core of the theology of baptism.

#### BAPTISM AND JUSTIFICATION

The willingness to take up new things is anchored in the theology of baptism. Therefore, it makes sense to search for new ways in which the essence of that theology can be expressed. The core of the theology of baptism is expressed in the duality of repentance and rebirth. At first the words repentance and rebirth appear to mainly refer to human decisions, and thus to fit closely with what is the general view of baptism, i.e. that people, parents or candidates for baptism decide to have their children baptized or to be baptized. Then the whole emphasis is usually on that human decision. However, the words repentance and rebirth clearly express more. They presuppose that one turns and converts to something that one has not created by oneself and, in turn, that one becomes a different, reborn person through a power that comes from elsewhere. Just as humans do not produce their own birth, they do not effect their own rebirth. They are themselves actively and totally involved, but it is a process that is initiated elsewhere, "from above," as Jesus says in his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:3).

Because of baptism's character as a gift, this sacrament—together with the Lord's Supper—has been viewed as one of the most expressive symbolizations of the essence of the doctrine of justification. After all, the core of the doctrine of justification—forgiveness given *sola gratia*—is also the core of the theology of baptism and the Lord's Supper. However, in these two sacraments, it also becomes clear that this divine gift of



grace requires a human answer. That is why the Lima text discusses baptism's character as "both God's gift and our human response".<sup>22</sup>

In this context it is significant that Berkouwer, who frequently uses the notion 'correlation' for this dual character of gift and answer, describes the scope of that notion most accurately in his studies on justification and on the sacraments. On this correlation he notes:

The correlation between faith and promise, faith and justification does not become a divine monologue in which man is a mere telephone through which God addresses Himself .... The mystery of the correlation is apparent, however, only when it really embraces the reality of human existence. The miracle of grace occurs in the act or attitude of faith, the faith that is roused by the Holy Spirit. With this *sola gratia* is not spurned; it is verified.<sup>23</sup>

In this connection it may not even be such a bad idea to speak of the religious attitude in mind here in terms of a talent for faith. After all, this word expresses, on the one hand, the gift-character of faith—talent as aptitude, gift, charisma—but, on the other hand, also refers to one's own active participation: a talent must also be developed. Having or not having a certain talent is often spoken about with a degree of equanimity and indolence. Biblically speaking, however, that is an unjustifiable attitude. In the first place, because we often do not know what hidden talents we have. We do not yet know who we shall be. Often, we do not discover our talents until we are somewhat advanced in age. And, in the second place, the biblical call to make the most of one's talents applies to this as well: that is, contribute actively to what we have freely received (Matthew 25:14-30).

#### INCULTURATON: BETWEEN CONFIRMATION AND NEGATION

What holds true in regard to the individual believer also holds true for the process of inculturation as a whole. In the question of the relationship of continuity and discontinuity in baptism, we can also involve the inculturation event. In 1989 the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches made the following statement

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<sup>22</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 3 (B-8).

regarding this relation: “The Gospel must not be used to promote a ‘levelling-out’ of culture, everything the same everywhere.”<sup>24</sup> The report acknowledges that the Gospel illuminates every culture, that it holds every culture, as it were, up against the light of the proclamation of Christ. But the report also acknowledges that, up to a point, every culture illuminates our understanding of the Gospel: “Different cultures can perceive in the Gospel that which other cultures had failed to perceive.”<sup>25</sup>

In fact, we refer here to a double process of transformation. On the entering site, the Gospel, and the receiving site, the culture, something happens. The Gospel changes the receiving culture, but the receiving culture also adds something to the Gospel. From the moment that Jesus was called Lord (*kyrios*) the concept of lordship changed, but the image of Jesus changed as well. The same holds true for what is currently happening in, for example, Africa when Christians call Jesus their ancestor, healer, chief, king, etc. It changes their ideas of an ancestor, healer, chief and king, but it changes Jesus also. During the whole history of Christian doctrine we can observe these kind of changes in such a process of double transformation. It will be clear that this phenomenon concerns the relation of continuity and discontinuity as well.

Instead of speaking about continuity and discontinuity, we could also speak about Incarnation and Cross and Resurrection. Incarnation implies that God wants to live with us (John.1:14). That means that God wants to take on a cultural vestment. Where Incarnation stands for the *given* of that cultural vestment, Cross and Resurrection stand for the *nature* of that vestment. Cross and Resurrection are models for the death and resurrection with Christ—an event that is symbolized in the baptismal ritual. We die to our old Adam and rise as reborn people with Christ, our second Adam. Only the one who is prepared to lose himself is prepared to find himself, says Jesus (Mark 8:35; John 12:24). It is expected of faith that this experience is not only made at the time of baptism,

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<sup>23</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Studies in Dogmatics) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963, 2nd pr.), 178-79.

<sup>24</sup> *Seoul 1989. Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> general Council, Seoul, August 15-26, 1989* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), 178.

but at every moment of one's life. Thus, baptism always refers to a critical *purifying process*—a catharsis. While Incarnation stands for affirmation, Cross and Resurrection stand for self-loss and for finding oneself through losing oneself.

Incarnation cannot be discussed without speaking about Cross and Resurrection. *Indwelling* (Incarnation) finds nothing without a *change* on the entering and receiving site and *change* (Cross and Resurrection) does not find a place without solidarity (affirmation). Outside of this moment of interaction, no culture can unveil something about Jesus. *In* this process of double transformation, however, account must be taken of new and creative syntheses.

Presently, the center of gravity of Christendom has moved to the southern hemisphere. That is due to a lively and creative cultural application process. The process of inculturation is also often named contextualization. That is especially believed about the social-political dimension of this process. What will this process yield? What can be expected from the new inculturation of the meaning of Jesus in non-Western cultures? Church growth? Sometimes that appears to be the undertone of many explanations of Western as well as non-Western theologians about the inculturation of the Gospel in the non-Western world. If Christianity had adapted more to Asian culture, for example, then it would have had many more roots in Asia....is the tenor of many arguments.

The plausibility of that argument cannot always be exhibited. In Japan an unique Japanese theology developed in the 1950s (after the Second World War), but the theology did not practice a collective power. Only one percent of the Japanese population is Christian. In Korea Christian theology has a strong Western character, especially in large churches, and after the Second World War more than 25 percent of the population became Christian. Obviously other factors played a part in that.

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<sup>25</sup>*Seoul 1989*, 178.

If church growth is not the direct response of a successful inculturation and therefore cannot be the direct goal, then what is? A better form of Christianity? Another Asia, Africa and Latin America? Can we see any indication of it?

The Congolese, Roman Catholic theologian Metena M'nteba cast this question in an article with the beautiful title, "Inculturation in the "Third Church": a Godly Pentecost or a Revenge of the Culture?" By the 'Third Church,' he meant the African church following out from the original Oriental church (the 'First Church') and mainly formed by the Western church as the 'Second Church.' Is this formation of a real African church to be seen as a legitimate result of Pentecost or should the old African cultures now seize this as their chance to take the strange interloper in hand as the 'revenge of the culture?'

Has—as M'nteba asks—the Western inculturation made the meaning of Jesus in the West more Christian in the sense of the West being more social and peaceful (during the last 2000 years)? Has it drastically changed the Western culture?<sup>26</sup> This has been a vehement debate concerning the all or nothing Christian character of the Western culture that has raged in Europe and North America for decades. Should the culture thank the Enlightenment that it was wrestled out of the grip of the church and Christendom or is the Enlightenment a fruit of Christianity?<sup>27</sup> That is an endless discussion that often degenerates into a trivial question of whether we can bring the desires and burdens of our cultural achievements in connection to Christianity.

In any case, that debate makes it clear that the fruit of the inculturation of the Gospel in the West is disputed. In view of this one occasion of a bad example, can we cherish higher expectations in respect to other continents?

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26 M. M'nteba, 'De inculturatie in de "Derde Kerk": een goddelijk Pinksteren of de wraak van de culturen?', *Concilium* 28 (1992) 1, 114-128.

27 Cf. for this debate, among others, K. Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte. Die theologische Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart:Kohlhammer, [1953] 1973 6<sup>th</sup> pr.); H. Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung als Selbstbehauptung. Erweiterte und überarbeitete Neuauflage von 'Legitimität der Neuzeit'*, I-II (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, [1966] 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> pr.), 141-266 ('Theologischer Absolutismus und humane Selbstbehauptung') and W. Pannenberg, *Christentum in einer säkularisierten Welt* (Freiburg:Herder, 1988).

Modesty appears necessary here—a modesty that has to do with the question of how far the function of religion has to do with the improvement of the world. One could also argue the other side: Governments must improve the world and religions must show people on the verge of despair or hope in reference to their own deeds.

More significantly, it appears the reason that we, along with M’nteba, do not only concentrate on the question of examples of an Africanizing or Asianizing of Christianity in respect to new inculturations, but on the question about the existential experience of the Gospel in Africa and Asia. It has to do with the place that Cross and Resurrection can take in an individual’s life and in the community as a whole. From Jesus’ own lifestyle it appears, perhaps too painfully, that a life that is determined by Cross and Resurrection is not measured by success or failure. Therefore, the two-in-one of affirmation (Incarnation) and negation (Cross and Resurrection) has much to do with *Revelation*: with the surprising disclosure of what is, so far, the unknown and unprepared. It might be that our affirmations then turn out to be strongly criticized and that our denials be overruled by God’s affirmations.

Thus, every form of contextualization of the Gospel shall always be characterized through the same mental attitude that also characterizes the individual worshipper during baptism. Such a mindset frees us from every form of convulsiveness that leads to an over-rating or under-rating of the current, extensive process of contextualization of the Gospel. Whenever the *simul justus et peccator* may also become heard here, we do not attempt to recreate the ‘Christian’ wheel, but we are also not ashamed of the conviction that some unmistakable time and place bound forms of inculturation cannot be damaged by time and also apply to other contexts. Against both extremes—renewing and conservative impulse—is the abasement that baptism calls us to, the most adequate attitude. Only this attitude can give an adequate answer to the question we placed on the first page of this contribution. The role which the context can play in contextual theology is exactly the same role which our personal integrity plays in baptism. Although we die and rise with Christ, our personal integrity is not destroyed. Or—in a theologically better

formulation—just because we die and rise with Christ, our personal integrity is saved by God. Hence, the Presbyterian, Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako speaks of “integrity in conversion.”<sup>28</sup> Applied to the role of the context in contextual theology, it means that only when a context, as it were, is prepared to die and rise with Christ, it can play its illuminating role in the proclamation of the Gospel.

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Summary:

It is not simple to write about contextual theology in relation to the theme of this volume: religion without ulterior motives. In current contextual theology the strength of this form of theology is, after all, correctly seen in its embeddedness in and contribution to an existing culture. Of course, this does not imply an uncritical adoption of that culture, but a form of *adaptation* will certainly always be discussed. Otherwise there is only a hostile confrontation. So, the point of issue is always the role which religion can play in a certain culture. Is that the same as the ‘instrumentalisation’ Bram van de Beek is liberation theology blaming for in his article on ‘Religion without ulterior motive’? That will be the main question to be answered in this contribution: *What’s the role of the context in contextual theology?* We approach this question from the position that *the continuity and discontinuity that is spoken about in Christian baptism supplies the outstanding pattern from which we can speak about the characteristics of the Christian faith in the midst of a number of various contexts*. We fully agree with Bram van de Beek’s emphasis on the meaning of baptism as main characteristic of Christian life. In the elaboration of the impact of baptismal renewal in our topical life, however, the differences between us will be turn out.

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<sup>28</sup> K. Bediako, *Theology & Identity. The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*. (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 4.